Memory and Homeland: Intersections of Food and Identity in Indian Diasporic Fiction and Film

Synopsis

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Food is our common ground, a universal experience.
-James Beard, American Chef.

In the sacred verses of the Bhagavad Gita, Lord Krishna says, "Annath Bhavanthi Bhuthani," i.e., all living creatures originate from food, for it is the very "stuff" of our bodies. This timeless wisdom forms the bedrock of our existence, underpinning the essential connection between food and life itself. In *Edible Ecriture,* Terry Eagleton suggested that "food makes up our bodies, just as words make up our mind" (Bevan 207). As the core of our existence, it is not surprising that food has been part of narratives and stories since time immemorial.

From the sumptuous feasts chronicled in Homer's The Odyssey to Chaucer's The Canterbury Tales, with pilgrims sharing stories over hearty meals and through the bustling streets of Dickens' Victorian London (Oliver Twist), where food depicted social disparities, food imagery has transcended epochs, embedding itself as a vibrant thread in the fabric of literary narratives. Shakespeare's plays, depicting the witches' cauldron in Macbeth and the bounteous feast in Twelfth Night, exemplify how food becomes a medium for conveying eerie prophecies or romantic intrigue. Similarly, the luminous pages of Indian literature abound with food imagery. Rabindranath Tagore's Chokher Bali, Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things, Vikram Seth's A Suitable Boy, and Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children are some literary narratives that offer a vivid portrayal of Indian feasts, showcasing the rich cultural heritage of India.

While literature has recorded food and eating habits since the earliest written records, the designation of more scholarly investigations of food as Food Studies is a recent development. Food Studies is an interdisciplinary field that includes all aspects of food, encompassing its production and consumption, cultural significance, social function of eating and nutritional impact. It is an umbrella-term that includes foodways, gastronomy, and culinary history. Amy Bentley, a food historian opines, "Scholars across disciplines have studied food for a long time, but it is only in the last ten to fifteen years or so that food as a focus for scholarly study has gained real acceptance" (114).

Among literary and cultural theorists, Roland Barthes was one of the first to explore the semiotics of food and culture, expressing his ideas in Toward a Psycho-sociology of Contemporary Food Consumption (1961), in which he wrote, "For what is food? It is not only a collection of

products.... It is also, and at the same time, a system of communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior" (21). In the 1960s and 1970s, Food Studies developed more significantly with the writings on food and foodways by anthropologists Claude Lévi Strauss and Mary Douglas. Although several journals have focused on Food Studies, the publication of Gastronomica: The Journal of Food and Culture in 2001 first highlighted the insights humanities could bring to the study and significance of food in all its forms. Another journal focusing on food is Alimentum: The Literature of Food which was published in 2006. Both the journals are evidence of the growth of Food Studies and show how the discipline has expanded to include the study of food in literature.

Over the past two decades, a number of groundbreaking books have been published on food and literature. Kara K. Keeling and Scott T. Pollard's Critical Approaches to Food in Literature (2009), Allison Carruth's Global Appetites: American Power and Literature of Food (2013) and Sandra Gilbert's Eating Words: A Norton Anthology of Food Writing (2015) are some of the remarkable works in this field. In the "Introduction" chapter of Critical Approaches to Food in Children's Literature, Kara Keeling and Scott Pollard state that "food is fundamental to literature...If food is fundamental to life and a substance upon which civilizations and cultures have built themselves, then food is also fundamental to the imagination and the imaginary arts" (5).

In recent years, Food Studies has developed into a solid and distinctly academic field. As Ken Albala, a food historian, suggests, "a critical mass of professional academics have devoted a significant portion of their energy to questions of all aspects of food culture or foodways" (15). Thereby, 'Literary Food Studies' can be viewed as a new and emerging field of inquiry, which re-evaluates, rethinks, and rediscovers the importance of food in understanding the ways in which we live and communicate. In One Reader's Digest: Toward a Gastronomic Theory of Literature, Brad Kesller writes, "Food in fiction engages all the reader's senses (taste, smell, touch, feel, and sight)" (151). He explains how food draws the reader into the text, saying, "Meals are magnets, they draw people together. They also serve as memory triggers, reminding characters of the past, and transporting them to another time through the memory of a similar previous sensory experience" (153). It is, therefore, essential to address not only the place occupied by food in literary narratives but also its ability to

convey suggested messages.

Within the domain of food and literature, food has a significant place in Diaspora Studies. When immigrants migrate to a foreign land, they carry cultural artifacts in their memories. The rites, rituals, myths, legends, languages, dialects, clothes, and food keep them connected to their homeland. Food critic Anthelme Brillat-Savarin eloquently states, “Tell me what you eat, and I will tell you who you are” (3). In literature, this holds especially true while examining the diaspora, where food transcends the realm of mere sustenance. It grows into a vessel of memory, a passport to the homeland, and a mirror reflecting the facets of identity.

Within the diaspora, the notion of ‘memory’ resonates profoundly. It refers to recollection of cultural, historical, and ancestral experiences, often tied to a homeland or place of origin. It is in the flavors of a grandmother's recipe, the spices that waft through an open window, and the ritual of feasting. In the words of Marcel Proust, “And suddenly the memory returns....When from a long-distant past nothing subsists, the smell and taste of things remain poised a long time, like souls, ready to remind us, waiting and hoping for their moment, amid the ruins of all the rest; and bear unfaltering, in tiny and almost impalpable drop of their essence, the vast structure of recollection” (36).

‘Homeland’, in the diasporic context, emerges not as a physical location but as a realm of collective memory, nostalgia, and aspiration. It is encapsulated in the traditional dishes, aromas, and flavors that transcend geographical boundaries, anchoring individuals to their roots. Furthermore, ‘identity’, the most intricate thread in this narrative tapestry, is intricately interwoven with food. It is forged through the cultural and sensory connections to food, serving as a powerful symbol of heritage, and the preservation of traditions.

One of the most ancient and rich cultures in the world is that of India. It is a mixture of languages, religions, and ethnicities which can be attributed to a history of empires, invasions, colonization, and migration. Indian cuisine is as varied and diverse as the culture from which it springs. People from the West have shown interest in Indian food since the late 1500s when Dutch explorer Jan Huygen van Linschoten introduced the word “curry” to the English Language in his travel accounts (Stein 135). In *Curry at Work: Nibbling at the Jewel in the Crown*, Stein states that Indian foods, particularly curry, “had been both adapted and adopted and during the nineteenth century

was becoming rather fashionable in Britain" (137). Since that time, Indian foods have been embraced by England to the point when, in a 2001 speech describing Britain's multicultural state, British Foreign Secretary Robin Cook said, "Chicken Tikka Masala is now a true British National dish given its extreme popularity and adaptation to British taste preferences" (Cook). Today, interest in Indian culture and Indian food is growing around the world.

In her brief autobiographical essay *Food and Belonging: At Home and in Alien Kitchens*, Indian-American critic Ketu Katrak suggests that culinary stories, often nostalgic, serve as a way to handle immigrant memories and the desire to return to one's homeland. Reflecting on her journey from Mumbai to the United States, she mentions, "My memory banks about food overflowed only after I left India to come to the United States as a graduate student. I longed for my native food as I dealt with my dislocation from the throbbing Mumbai metropolis" (270). For Katrak, food became a mental and emotional anchor, transporting her back to her distant childhood home while providing a sense of belonging in the United States. Thereby, for a diasporic writer, food is one of the sites to which the migrant turns to re-establish their identity, and sense of community in a displaced world.

Indian English novels such as Salman Rushdie's *Midnight Children* (1981), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), Anita Desai's *Fasting, Feasting* (1999), Bharati Kirchner's *Pastries: A Novel of Desserts and Discoveries* (2003), Kiran Desai's *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006), Manju Kapur's *The Immigrant* (2008), Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke* (2011) etc. suggest that many literary narratives are rooted in culinary discourse.

The concept of diaspora extends far beyond the confines of fiction, encompassing a broader canvas that includes the world of cinema. Often, film ceases to be a mere source of entertainment, instead serving as a captivating medium through which we can explore the profound impact of food on diasporic experience. They offer a visual feast of culinary traditions, mirroring the intricate interplay of memory, homeland, and identity. Films like Mira Nair's *Mississippi Masala* (1991), *The Namesake* (2006), Gurinder Chadha's *Bhaji on the Beach* (1994), *Bend It Like Beckham* (2002), David Kaplan's *Today's Special* (2009), Ritesh Batra's *The Lunch Box* (2013), and Lasse Hallström's *The Hundred-Foot Journey* (2014) etc. are a few examples of Indian diasporic films that use food as a lens to explore themes of cultural identity, memory and longing.

The works selected for the study are Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), Preethi Nair's *One Hundred Shades of White* (2003), Amulya Malladi's *The Mango Season* (2004) and Amit Majmudar's *The Abundance* (2013). The film *Today's Special* (2009) directed by David Kaplan and *The Hundred-Foot Journey* (2014) directed by Lasse Hallström have been selected.

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni (1956-), an Indian-American author, poet, activist, and teacher, was born in Kolkata, India. She attained her degree in B.A. from the University of Calcutta, moved to the U.S. in order to pursue higher education in literature, and has remained there ever since. She received a Ph.D. in English from the University of California, Berkley in 1985. She has been teaching at various institutes, including the University of Houston. She is the former president of *Maitri,* the South Asian women's helpline against domestic abuse. Divakaruni's journey is a testament to her dedication and talent as a writer. She began her writing career as a poet. Her important volumes of poetry are *Black Candle* (1991) and *Leaving Yuba City* (1997). Her first collection of stories, *Arranged Marriage* (1995), won an American Book Award, a PEN Josephine Miles Award, a Bay Area Book Reviewers Award, and a Light of India Award.

In 2015, *The Economic Times* included her in their list of twenty Influential Global Indian Women, greatly increasing her visibility on the literary horizon. Her major novels include *The Mistress of Spices* (1997), *Sister of My Heart* (1999), *Queen of Dreams* (2004), *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), *Oleander Girl* (2012), *Before We Visit the Goddess* (2016), *The Forest of Enchantments* (2019) and *Independence (2022).* Her works have been published in a number of magazines and anthologies, including *The Atlantic Monthly, The New Yorker, The Best American Short Stories* and the O. Henry Prize. Her fiction has been translated into twenty-nine languages, including Dutch, Hebrew, Indonesian, Bengali, Turkish and Japanese. Her books, *The Mistress of Spices* and *Sister of My Heart,* have been made into films with the same titles.

Mistress of Spices (1997) is a captivating novel that weaves a mesmerizing tale of magic and spices. It is a blend of reality and the supernatural, a sort of hybrid that provides a combination of immigration, multiculturalism, and magic realism. The novel, with its lyrical prose and vivid descriptions, brings to life the aromas and flavors of the spices, making them central characters in the story. Thus, it transports the readers into a sensory journey where food serves as a catalyst for personal

transformation and the preservation of cultural identity.

Preethi Nair (1971-) is an Indian- British author and entrepreneur. She was born in Kerala, India and went to London, U.K., as a child. She worked as a management consultant but gave it up to follow her dream and become a writer. Her experiences as an immigrant have profoundly influenced her work. Her first novel, *Gypsy Masala* (2000), was rejected by several publishers. She then set up her own publishing company and PR agency, Nine Fish, in Northampton, to publish and promote the book. Working under the alias Pru Menon, she gained substantial press coverage and subsequently signed a three-book deal with Harper Collins. Nair won much acclaim for her next work, *One-Hundred Shades of White* (2003), which explores the themes of cultural identity, food, and the immigrant experience in the U.K. The BBC has also acquired the book for a television adaptation. Her works reflect a deep understanding of cultural nuances and challenges faced by immigrants, particularly within the context of identity and belonging. She won the Asian Woman of Achievement Award for her endeavors and was also shortlisted as Publicist of the Year for the PPC awards.

Set in England, *One-Hundred Shades of White* (2003) is a poignant novel that delves into the life of Indian immigrants, Nalini and her children, Maya and Satchin. Nair incorporates food as a narrative tool and skillfully portrays food as a medium to transcend differences and serve as a common ground for building relationships and understanding one's identity.

Amulya Malladi (1974-), an Indian- American author, was born in Madhya Pradesh, India, and later moved to the United States. She earned her bachelor's degree in electronics engineering from Osmania University, Hyderabad, and her master's degree in journalism from University of Memphis, U.S. She is the author of a number of novels, including *A Breath of Fresh Air* (2002), *The Mango Season* (2003), *Serving Crazy with Curry* (2004), *Song of the Cuckoo Bird* (2005), *The Sound of Language* (2007), *A House of Happy Mothers* (2016), *The Copenhagen Affair* (2017) and *A Death in Denmark* (2023). Malladi's writing has garnered recognition for its insightful portrayal of characters and the immigrant experience. She also works as a marketing executive for a global life sciences company.

The Mango Season (2003) revolves around the life of Priya Rao, who returns to India after seven years in the U.S.A. to share the news of her engagement to Nick, an American. Amidst the

backdrop of a highly traditional Indian family, Priya grapples with her feelings for Nick, her family's expectations of an arranged marriage, and the clash of two cultures. The use of food, recipes, and kitchen politics explores Priya's growing discomfiture with her motherland and examines the diaspora's need to blend the best of both cultures.

Amit Majmudar (1979-), a distinguished author, poet, and radiologist, was born in Akron, Ohio. He is a second-generation immigrant who stands as a luminary in the realms of both literature and medicine. His journey into the world of literature began with the publication of his first poetry collection *0°, 0°*(2009). His debut novel, *Partitions* (2011), was critically acclaimed and was named the Kirkus Reviews Best Book of the Year. He received numerous awards and honors for poetry, including the Pushcart Prize and the Ohioan Book Award. He was also appointed as the first Poet Laureate of Ohio in 2015.

The Abundance (2013) weaves a compelling narrative that delves into the lives of Mala and Ronak, who are thrust back into their Midwestern Indian immigrant world when their mother's terminal illness is diagnosed. As they grapple with their dual identities and cultural clashes between India and America, the story unfolds through the lens of Indian cooking. Mala's love for cooking perfect Indian dishes becomes a journey of self-discovery, bringing forth their most profound conflicts and shared experiences.

The film *Today's Special* (2009) is based on the play *Sakina's Restaurant* (1998) written by Aasif Mandvi. The film adaptation, directed by David Kaplan, takes the essence of the play and expands it into a heart-warming exploration of food, family, and the immigrant experience. The film traces the journey of Samir (Aasif Mandvi), a talented chef in a prestigious Manhattan restaurant who aspires to achieve culinary greatness. Samir's journey is not only about mastering the culinary arts but also understanding the immigrant experience, the importance of family, and the power of food to bridge cultural gaps. The film received the Audience Award at the Newport International Film Festival (2009) and was nominated for the Austin Film Festival (2009).

The Hundred-Foot Journey (2014), directed by Lasse Hallström, is a delightful film adaptation of the novel of the same name by Richard C. Morais. The film tells the story of Hassan Haji (Manish Dayal), a boy from Mumbai whose family, after being displaced from their home in India, settles in a

small village in the south of France. Here, they open an Indian restaurant named Maison Mumbai, just a hundred feet across the street from the French restaurant, owned by famous chef Madame Mallory (Helen Mirren). A culinary war ensues, pitting Hassan's Mumbai-toughened father (Om Puri) against the imperious Michelin-starred chef, until Madame Mallory realizes that Hassan is a cook with natural talents far superior to her own. The film was nominated for the Golden Globe Award for Best Original Score (A.R. Rahman). It also received nominations from various festivals, recognizing its culinary-themed storytelling and cultural exploration.

The burgeoning field of literature and Food Studies has gained recognition recently, with significant contributions from notable publishing houses such as Routledge and Cambridge. Their publication of anthologies solely dedicated to literature and Food serves as a beacon for this emerging field. The exploration of Indian diaspora in literature and film has been a prolific field of research, often examining themes of migration, identity, memory, and a sense of homeland. However, specific intersections of these themes with food as a central element within Indian diasporic narratives, both in literature and film remain a relatively unexplored area.

The literature review reveals some of the critical works that have emerged from this dynamic intersection, shedding light on the role of food as a powerful tool of expression. For instance, J. Michelle Coghlan edited an anthology titled *The Cambridge Companion To Literature And Food* in 2020. It provides a comprehensive overview of the food portrayal in literature. In the same year, an article entitled *Reading Communities and Culinary Communities: The Gastropoetics of the South Asian Diaspora*by Parama Roy was published. It suggests that diasporic writers negotiate their identities, maintain cultural connections, and express themselves creatively through food.

In 2018, an anthology entitled *Literature and Food Studies* edited by Amy L. Tinger and Allison Carruth was published. This anthology explores the ways in which literary texts interact with food, delving into its cultural and social dimensions. Also, *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Food* edited by Lorna Darnell and Donna Brien was published in the same year. It examines connections between literature and food, covering various cultural contexts and historical periods. Moutushi Mukherjee's journal article entitled *The Return Migrant in Cinema: The Idealist and the Sceptic,* published in 2012, explores the depiction of the return of migrants to their places of origin or

homeland in films. It delves into the narratives and representations of return migration in cinema, offering insights into the complexities of this experience.

Anita Mannur's research paper *Culinary Nostalgia: Authenticity, Nationalism, and Diaspora,* published in 2007, shed light on the intricate relationship between food, memory, and cultural identity within the South Asian Diaspora. It explores how food invokes nostalgia and plays a pivotal role in defining identity. Furthermore, her book *Culinary Fictions: Food in South Asian Diasporic Culture*, published in 2010, elaborates on food, culture, migration, and identity. It discusses how food plays a role in issues of race, class, gender, ethnicity, and national identity, especially in the context of diasporic literature.

Nilanjana S. Roy's book *A Matter of Taste: The Penguin Book of Indian Writing on Food,* published in 2004, is an anthology that combines a diverse collection of writings by Indian authors on food. It serves a literary feast celebrating the heritage of India and its relationship with food. Another significant book, *The Migrant's Table: Meals and Memories in Bengali American Households*, published in 2004 by Krishendu Ray, analyzes the experience of Bengali- American households and their culinary practices. The book includes recipes, rituals, and stories written by well known diasporic writers. In her journal article, entitled *Nations and Alienations: Diaspora in Recent Indian Fiction,* published in 2004, Rita Joshi explores the themes of diaspora and identity in contemporary Indian fiction and film. It specifically analyzes how Indian authors and filmmakers depict the experiences of diasporic communities.

One of the goals of this research would be to investigate the dimensions of food while keeping the holistic viewpoints of Indian diasporic culture in mind. Food has always been a source of sustenance as well as a source of relief from hunger. Alleviation of hunger is one of the United Nations' Sustainable Goals. As a result, the proposed study will not only investigate the relationship between food and memory and identity, but it will also investigate the humanitarian perspective to determine how food can become a source of human connection, cultural bonding, social bonding, and psychological satisfaction. This suggested study will also address the contradicting images that often emerge between "haves" and "have-nots" in connection to food by providing instances of food and tying it to identity.

The proposed study will attempt a comprehensive analysis of the depiction of first and second generation immigrants in Indian diasporic literature. By placing food at the forefront of their narratives, the study will explore the intricate connections between food, memory, identity, and an enduring connection to one's homeland. Furthermore, the study will also undertake a comparative analysis of the selected works, not only celebrating their diverse creative expressions but also seeking the valuable findings from the intersections and divergences within them.

The objectives of the proposed study therefore are:

1. To study the various dimensions of food.
2. To examine food as a symbol of memory and identity in the selected novels and films.
3. To make a comparative study of the representation of food in the selected novels and films.
4. To analyze the narrative and cinematic techniques with reference to the selected novels and films.
5. To assess the contribution made by the selected writers and filmmakers to Food and Diasporic literature.

In the light of the above-mentioned objectives, the tentative chapter division of the proposed study is as follows:

Chapter I- History on a Platter: Introduction.

Part A: Evolution of Food Studies and dimensions of food in the context of Indian Diasporic literature and film.

Part B: The making of the writers, filmmakers and their works.

Chapter II- The Secret of Spices: An Analysis of *The Mistress of Spices* and *The Abundance*.

Chapter III- Preserving Flavours: Food and Identity in *One Hundred Shades of White* and *The Mango Season*.

Chapter IV- The Cinematic Palate: A Study of *Today's Special* and *The Hundred-Foot Journey.*

Chapter V- *Masala* Mix: A Comparative Study of the Selected Novels and Films.

Chapter VI- Conclusion.

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